DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 076 914 CG 008 067

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TITLE Effects of Similarity of Fate on Bad News Transmission: A Reexamination.
INSTITUTION Georgia Univ., Athens. Inst. for Behavioral Research.
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association (Chicago, Illinois, May 9-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Fear; *Psychological Patterns; *Response Mode; Speeches; Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

Subjects (communicators) were more likely to transmit bad news (p.005) and less likely to be concerned about what the recipient thought about them (p.025) if, from the communicator's perspective, the recipient believed that both she and the communicator would receive the bad news fate than if the recipient believed only she would receive the bad news fate. These results were consistent with a fear of negative evaluation hypothesis. A guilt hypothesis was not signigicantly supported. Although communicators who believed that they would not actually share the fate with the recipient felt significantly more guilty (p.005) than communicators who believed that they would actually share the bad news fate, they did not transmit the bad news significantly less frequently. (Author)

ED 076914

Presented at 1973 Midwestern Psychological Assn.

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Abstract

Subjects (communicators) were more likely to transmit bad news ($p < .005$) and less likely to be concerned about what the recipient thought about them ($p < .025$) if, from the communicator's perspective, the recipient believed that both she and the communicator would receive the bad news fate than if the recipient believed only she would receive the bad news fate. These results were consistent with a fear of negative evaluation hypothesis. A guilt hypothesis was not significantly supported. Although communicators who believed that they would not actually share the fate with the recipient felt significantly more guilty ($p < .005$) than communicators who believed that they would actually share the bad news fate, they did not transmit the bad news significantly less frequently.

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EFFECTS OF SIMILARITY OF FATE ON BAD NEWS TRANSMISSION: A REEXAMINATION[1]

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A recent series of experiments has shown that communicators are more reluctant to communicate bad news than to communicate good news when the potential recipient is the person for whom the news is good or bad (Rosen & Tesser, 1970; Tesser, Rosen, & Conlee, 1972). This difference in the rate of communicating good and bad news has been termed the MUM effect--keeping MUM about unwanted messages. For an exposition of the paradigmatic study see Rosen and Tesser (1970).

In an attempt to explore the dynamics of the MUM effect, Tesser and Rosen (1972) examined news transmission as a function of whether or not one recipient's fate described in the news was shared by the communicator. The reasoning was that "If [the recipient] is unfortunate, [the communicator] may feel that he also should be unfortunate. He may even feel guilty about having luck [Heider, 1958, p. 288]." If responses associated with negative affect such as guilt are less likely to be made than nonguilt-associated responses, then messages associated with guilt are less likely to be transmitted than messages not associated with guilt. In most situations, a communicator does not share the bad news fate with the recipient of the news. Therefore, bad news messages would tend to be associated with guilt and to be less likely to be transmitted than good news messages. The results of the study by Tesser and Rosen (1972) were

consistent with this reasoning. Good news was communicated more frequently than bad news. Further, subjects in the bad news not shared fate condition experienced most guilt and communicated less frequently than either bad news shared fate subjects or good news not shared fate subjects.

An alternative explanation for the results, however, is that fear of negative evaluation (Rosen & Tesser, 1972) mediates the relationship between the sharing of fate and bad news transmission. Assume that a communicator prefers to be positively rather than negatively evaluated by others. Suppose he tells a recipient some bad news and the recipient believes that the communicator does not share the recipient's fate. Under these conditions the communicator has reason to fear that the recipient may negatively evaluate him. For example, the recipient may attribute malevolent intent (Johnson, 1972) to him. That is, the recipient may believe that the communicator wants to see the recipient suffer, or that the communicator "caused" the bad news, or that the communicator is gloating about his own good fortune compared to the recipient's. The recipient may also be jealous of the communicator. On the other hand, if the recipient believes that the communicator is to share his bad fate, the communicator has less reason to fear negative evaluation. It is hard for the recipient to be jealous of or attribute malevolent intent to someone who is to undergo the same negative fate as himself. It follows from this line of reasoning that the sharing of fate will reduce the reluctance to communicate bad news, and, since there is no particular reason for fearing a negative evaluation when the news is good, sharing of fate should not necessarily increase the transmission of good news--precisely the outcomes reported by Rosen and Tesser (1972).

From the above argument it is apparent that fear of negative evaluation is dependent upon the communicator's perception of what the recipient believes. That is, if the communicator thinks the recipient believes that the fate is shared, then the communicator has less reason to fear a negative evaluation than if the recipient believes that the fate is not shared. On the other hand, guilt is dependent upon what the communicator believes the world to be, regardless of what the recipient believes. If the communicator of bad news knows he does not share the recipient's fate, then whether or not the recipient perceives the communicator as sharing his fate, the communicator should feel guilty.

In the Tesser and Rosen (1972) study, either guilt or fear of negative evaluation or some combination of the two mediating processes could have been responsible for the differences in transmission of bad news. However, in the context of the original study, it is impossible to tease apart the two effects. Regarding the sharing of fate, what the communicator believed to be the actual state of affairs (guilt determinant) and wnat he thought the recipient perceived to be the state of affairs (fear of negative evaluation determinant) were confounded. Clearly, it is necessary to assess the independent effects of these hypothesized mediators in a situation in which what the communicator believes and what he thinks the recipient believes are manipulated orthogonally. Given such a situation, one would expect that to the extent that guilt is an important determinant of the reluctance to transmit bad news, transmission would be greater when the communicator believes that he is sharing the fate of the recipient than when he

believes he is not. To the extent that fear of negative evaluation is a determinant of the reluctance to communicate bad news, transmission would be greater when the communicator thinks that the recipient believes that the fate is shared.

Method

Overview

Each subject reported for a learning experiment and seated herself in a waiting room with a female confederate (the recipient). While both were waiting for the experimenters, a male confederate who presumably had just completed the experiment entered the room. The male confederate informed the subject and the recipient that: a) either both would be shocked or neither would be shocked (recipient shared fate), or b) only one of them would be shocked (recipient not shared fate). After the male confederate left the room, the experimenter entered and described the experiment to the two females. During the course of the experiment, both females sampled the shock, and the recipient found it extremely noxious. After separating the subject and the recipient, the experimenter told the subject that: a) both she and her partner would be shocked (communicator shared fate) or b) only her partner would be shocked (communicator not shared fate). The subject was then provided an opportunity to tell the bad news--that her partner was to be shocked.

Subjects

Sixty-four[3] female undergraduates at the University of Georgia were recruited for the study as part of their introductory psychology course requirements.

Procedure

Subjects were recruited for a "learning" experiment. One minute after the subject arrived for the experiment, a female confederate, the recipient, entered the waiting room, sat down, and busied herself. A minute later, the male confederate entered on the pretense of getting the books he had left in the room. Both the male confederate and the recipient were blind to the actual shock fate.[4] The male confederate initiated a conversation with the recipient and the subject. Following a script as closely as possible, the male confederate and the recipient established that: (1) the male confederate had just participated in the experiment that the recipient and the subject were waiting for; (2) the experiment involved shock and that everyone got a test shock; (3) the male confederate found the shock painful; and (4) the recipient was worried about being shocked.

Recipient fate manipulation. The communicator's perceptions of the recipient's expectations concerning the sharing of the fate were manipulated. by comments from the male confederate. For those subjects in the recipient shared fate conditions, the male confederate stated that "Either both of you always get shocked or neither of you gets shocked." For those subjects in the recipient not shared fate conditions, the male confederate stated that "One of you always gets shocked and the other one never gets shocked." In order to further strengthen the manipulation, the recipient questioned the male confederate who then restated the manipulation. The male confederate then picked up his books and left. The recipient again stated that she was afraid of the shock, repeated what the male confederate said, and probed the subject to see if she understood the manipulation.

One minute after the recipient had clarified the recipient fate manipulation,

the experimenter[5] entered the waiting room, introduced himself, and took the recipient and the subject to the experimental room. In the room were mirror-tracing equipment and a battery operated stimulator. An adjoining room was partially visible through an open doorway.

After checking the names of the subject and the recipient, the experimenter "reminded" the recipient that she would have to stay after the experiment was over in order to fill out forms for a survey her psychology professor was making. This was intended to convey to the subject the idea that she would not be able to interact with or leave with the recipient at the end of the experiment.

The experimenter outlined the experiment as consisting of (1) a 4 minute period in which the subject would perform the mirror tracing task while the recipient performed a "left-handed drawing task"; (2) a period in which the recipient would be able to ask the subject several questions in order to profit from her experience; (3) a third period in which both individuals would perform mirror tracing tasks; and (4) a final period in which both the subject and the recipient would work together on a complex mirror tracing design.

The experimenter asked that, except for the question and answer section of the experiment, the subject and the recipient not discuss any part of the experiment between themselves "so that responses on a postexperimental questionnaire would be independent." Finally, the experimenter again mentioned the survey form that only the recipient would have to fill out after the experiment was completed.

The inclusion of shock in the experiment was explained in terms of its having different effects on performance depending upon how much practice

an individual had had in the mirror tracing task. It was explained that subjects would be shocked only during the second task and that the subjects to be shocked would be selected in a random fashion.

The subject proceeded with the first task. The recipient was taken to the adjoining room, presumably to do the left-handed drawing task. After 4 minutes the experimenter stopped the subject, asked the recipient to return to the experimental room, and gave instructions for the question and answer part of the experiment. The experimenter explained that the recipient could ask any question she wanted. The subject was instructed to answer the questions with "yes," "no," or "I'm not sure," and not to include other comments. The subjects were told that no additional information would be given by voice and facial characteristics, the questions would be written on paper and passed between the subject and the recipient by the experimenter. The experimenter stressed that: (1) he was not interested in the questions asked or the answers given and would not even look at them; (2) he could neither help the recipient to write the questions nor help the subject answer the questions; and (3) the recipient could ask any question she wanted to.

The experimenter took the recipient into the adjoining room and supposedly administered a test shock before the question and answer period. The recipient emitted a scream loud enough for the subject to hear and said, "That was really painful." The experimenter returned to the experimental room, closed the door behind him, and administered a shock of 1500 microcoulomes to the subject, after which the subject filled out a shock reaction questionnaire on the painfulness of the shock.

Communicator fate manipulation. The communicator's expectations concerning the sharing of the fate were manipulated by means of a card which was

shown to the communicator by the experimenter. The card indicated whether or not further shock would be administered to the subjects. Both the communicator's and the recipient's names were typed on the card. Next to the recipient's name was printed "You will be shocked." In the communicator shared fate condition, "You will be shocked," was printed by the subject's name. In the communicator not shared fate condition, "You will not be shocked," was printed by the name of the subject. The experimenter was blind to both the actual and perceived conditions until this point in the experiment. After the experimenter put the card away, he said, "Oh, I forgot to tell your partner whether or not she will be shocked in the next task. Oh well, she'll find out soon enough anyway."

Dependent measures. During the question and answer period, the experimenter simply carried the three questions, one at a time, from the recipient to the subject. After the subject had responded to the question, the experimenter returned the note to the recipient and then threw away both the question and answer in view of the subject. The third question was the only question which dealt with transmission of bad news and served as the main dependent measure. In the recipient shared (not shared) condition, the third question was, "That guy said both of us or neither of us (only one of us) will get shocked. That sample shock was really painful. I'm really worried about it. Do you think that I will get shocked?" This first sententence was intended to make salient the recipient fate manipulation. To summarize the effect of the manipulations: An affirmative response to the third question in the recipient shared condition should result in the subject believing that the recipient thinks that the fate is to be shared. A "yes" response in the recipient not shared condition should result in the

subject believing that the recipient thinks that only she will be shocked. In both instances, what the communicator thinks the recipient believes is independent of what the communicator believes is the actual sharing of fate.

Following the question and answer section, the subject was given a questionnaire on the pretext of determining that she fully understood the experiment. This questionnaire included filler items, manipulation checks for the actual fate manipulation, person perception measures, and measures of felt guilt and fear of negative evaluation.

The subject was then told that the experiment was over but that additional information was needed. A second questionnaire was given to the subject. It included some exploratory items and the manipulation check for the recipient fate manipulation. The subjects were fully debriefed about the purpose and procedure of the experiment, and all questions were answered.

Results

The major dependent variable, news transmission, was analyzed by a 2 (recipient fate) X 2 (communicator fate) X 2 (news transmission) partitioned chi-square. Questionnaire data were analyzed using a 2 (recipient fate) X 2 (communicator fate) analysis of variance. Subjects indicated that they believed the recipient found the shock very noxious ($\bar{X}$ = 6.06; where 1 = not at all painful and 7 = very painful) although they themselves did not find the shock very painful ($\bar{X}$ = 2.67). Subjects also indicated that they knew that the recipient was to be shocked.

Guilt. It was reasoned that if the communicator believes she will not share the bad fate of the recipient, she would feel more guilty and transmit the news less than if she believed that she would share the fate. As predicted, subjects did feel significantly more guilty in the communicator not shared

condition than in the communicator shared condition on two measures, one administered before the subjects were made aware of the deception and one

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administered after. Also, there was a slight tendency for greater transmission

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(see Table 2) in the communicator shared (63%) than in the communicator

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not shared condition (50%), but this difference did not approach significance (see Table 3). Furthermore, 7 of the 8 within cell correlations between transmission and the two guilt measures were negative, and the two correlations over all subjects were significantly so ($r = -.2-$; $p < .05$ one-tail on each measure).

Fear of negative evaluation. It was reasoned that if subjects are concerned about being negatively evaluated, they would communicate less when they thought the recipient believed that they would not share the fate. In order to determine the extent to which subjects were concerned about being negatively evaluated by the recipient, subjects were asked to indicate how concerned they were when their partner asked them about the shock and how concerned they were about how the recipient would think of them if they transmitted the bad news fate. Subjects were also asked to indicate the extent to which they thought their partner would rate them as good, likeable, mature, responsible, and a person they could respect. None of

these latter items yielded significant results. More relevant to the hypothesis, however, subjects did indicate that they were significantly more concerned with what the recipient would think of them in the recipient not shared condition than in the recipient shared conditions (see Table 1). There were no significant results with respect to the subjects' concern when the recipient asked them about the shock.

With respect to transmission, the fear of negative evaluation hypothesis was well supported as can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. When subjects thought that the recipient believed that the fate was shared, they were more likely (78%) to transmit the bad news than if they thought the recipient believed they would not share the fate (34%). Some correlational results are also consistent with the hypothesis: Concern with impression is significantly correlated with transmission over all subjects (-.26, $p < .05$ one-tail). The correlation is significant and more negative over the recipient not shared cells ($r = -.32$; $p < .05$ one-tail) than over the recipient shared cells ($r = .07$; z for difference $= 1.55$; $p < .07$ one-tail).

Replication of Tesser and Rosen (1972). In the Tesser and Rosen (1972) study what has been termed recipient fate and communicator fate were totally confounded. Thus the appropriate comparison for replication purposes is between communicator shared recipient shared and communicator not shared recipient not shared. As was true of the Tesser and Rosen study, there was greater transmission ($\chi^2 = 10.16$; $p < .01$) and less guilt ($F = 6.62$; $df = 1/30$; $p < .05$) in the former condition than in the latter condition.

Discussion

Before discussing the major hypotheses concerning transmission of bad news, a question may be raised as to whether or not the transmission measure used really reflects a propensity to transmit bad news or a propensity to be honest. All subjects knew that the recipient was to be shocked. Since they could not avoid answering the question about whether or not the recipient was to be shocked, they either had to convey the bad news (say "Yes") or lie (say "I'm not sure" or "No").[6] There is no direct way of knowing how to interpret the measure. Some indirect evidence, however, suggests that propensity to communicate is the most reasonable interpretation. In the communicator shared/recipient not shared and in the communicator not shared/recipient shared cell there was no honest response. If a recipient was told the truth regarding her own fate she was misled concerning the communicator's fate. In the remaining two cells there was an "honest" response. Neither the guilt hypothesis nor the fear of negative evaluation hypothesis predicts a difference between these two sets of cells. If what was acutally being measured was honesty, however, then there should be a difference between the two sets of cells. In fact, the transmission rates were almost identical.

The major determinant of transmission of bad news in this study was whether the communicator thought that the recipient believed the fate was shared or not shared. Not only was there less transmission in the recipient not shared condition, but communicators indicated more concern with what the recipient thought of them. Furthermore, the more concern they exhibited, the less they transmitted across these conditions. Just this pattern of results was predicted from the fear of negative evaluation hypothesis.

There are a number of plausible reasons for a communicator to feel that the way she was evaluated by the recipient is partially determined by whether or not the recipient believes she shares the communicator's fate. If she believes that the fate is shared, there is no reason to be jealous of the communicator. Since the news affected the communicator as well as the recipient, the communicator had more of a "right" to talk about it. Further, the communicator's intent was less likely to be seen as malevolent since there was no reason to assume that she was the cause of the bad news. On the other hand, if the recipient believed that the communicator did not share the fate, it is possible that she was pleased with her good fortune.

Some earlier speculation (Rosen and Tesser, 1972) held that simply being associated with bad news might lead a communicator to fear a negative evaluation. The present results suggest that this effect is greater when the recipient believed the fate is not shared than when it is shared. Generalizing from Schachter's conclusion (1959) that "Misery doesn't love just any kind of company, it loves only miserable company [p. 24]," it is possible that communicators have no basis at all for fearing negative evaluation under conditions of shared fate.

In spite of the fact that the appropriate cells of the present study replicated the results of the similar cells in the Tesser and Rosen study (1972), the guilt hypothesis was not significantly supported and the present data make an interpretation of their data in terms of guilt questionable. As noted in the introduction, Tesser and Rosen confounded what the communicator believed and what she thought the recipient believed with regard to the sharing of fate. Since guilt is a private feeling which, presumably, manifests

itself because of the favorable inequity the communicator is experiencing, what the recipient believes (from the communicator's perspective) should be irrelevant and was, therefore, controlled in the present study.

Under these conditions the results neither support nor refute the guilt hypothesis. Communicators who thought they were to share the recipient's fate felt significantly less guilty, as called for by the hypothesis but on the crucial transmission measure they were not significantly higher. Also, most of the within cell correlations between guilt and transmission were negative as would be expected. However, none were significant (except the correlation across all subjects). Furthermore, there was no systematic trend for this relationship to be more pronounced in communicator shared conditions than in communicator not shared conditions as would be anticipated.

In light of the present results, it appears that transmission in the Tesser and Rosen study (1972) was primarily a function of what the communicator thought the recipient believed regarding the sharing of fate (this transmission presumably being mediated by fear of negative evaluation). What the communicator himself believed regarding the sharing of fate determined the communicator's feelings of guilt but probably did not play much of a role in determining transmission.

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Footnotes

[1]This grant was partially supported by Public Health Service Research Grant MH 18387-01 awarded to Sidney Rosen and Abraham Tesser from the National Institute of Mental Health.

[2]Requests for reprints should be sent to Abraham Tesser, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30601

[3]These only represent the subjects whose data were retained in the final analysis. Nine subjects were deleted for not understanding the recipient fate manipulation. Inclusion of these 9 subjects did not significantly affect the transmission results. Three subjects who had previously heard about the MUM experiments and 2 subjects who failed to follow instructions during the question and answer session were also discarded.

[4]The authors wish to acknowledge their gratitude to Virginia Blount, Susan Cameron, Teri Lippman, Mike Napier, and Mike Roberts for serving as confederates in the experiment.

[5]Each of the two experimenters ran an equal number of subjects in each condition and worked with each confederate approximately the same number of times. No significant differences in transmission were found among confederates or between experimenters.

[6]It is interesting to note that only one subject actually said, "No."

Table 1

Means and F-Ratios of Guilt and Concern
by Experimental Conditions

Measure	Recipient Shared		Recipient Not Shared		F-ratios df = 1/60		
	Communicator Shared	Communicator Not Shared	Communicator Shared	Communicator Not Shared	Recipient Fate	Communicator Fate	Interaction
Guilt (Preexperimental)	1.75	3.38	1.81	3.63	<1	11.58***	<1
Guilt (Postexperimental)	2.50	4.56	3.62	4.44	<1	8.21**	1.55
Concern	1.93	3.50	4.00	4.00	6.60*	2.45	2.45

*$p < .025$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .005$.

Table 2

Frequency of Bad News Transmission
by Experimental Conditions

Response	Recipient Shared		Recipient Not Shared	
	Communicator Shared	Communicator not Shared	Communicator Shared	Communicator not Shared
Transmitted	13	12	7	4
Did Not Transmit	3	4	9	12
Total	16	16	16	16

Table 3

Summary of Partitioned Chi Square Analysis of Bad News Transmission[a]

Source	df	χ^2
Total	3	14.08*
Recipient Fate X Transmission	1	12.44**
Communicator Fate X Transmission	1	1.02
Recipient Fate X Communicator Fate X Transmission	1	<1

[a]See Winer, 1962:632.

*$p < .005$.

**$p < .001$.